

I first heard Robbie Robertson in the spring of 1965 on an album by John Hammond called *So Many Roads*, that also included two other members of the group that three years later would be known as The Band, Levon Helm and Garth Hudson. Recorded in 1964, it was sort of a super session of musicians (except all the musicians backing Hammond were unknown) who would that year become part of what was called at the time, "The blues revival," with Mike Bloomfield on piano and Charlie Musselwhite on harp. When I saw Robertson and Helm back Bob Dylan at the end of that summer at Forest Hills Stadium in Queens, New York, and the full group then known as Levon and the Hawks again with Dylan about six weeks later, I thought, oh, they're the guys from the Hammond album. The music on that album was loud, tough and funky, and led me to the guys that music came from, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, Jimmy Reed, Otis Rush and the other Chicago greats. Unlike Bloomfield who would shortly become known when the first Paul Butterfield album was released that same year, Robertson didn't play extended runs at super speed. He played in short bursts that stabbed like a knife that were about sound and impact. Listen to *So Many Roads* and you'll hear the predecessor to the sound Dylan took on the road in the fall of '65 into the spring of '66. And it made total sense because a good percentage of Dylan's rock songs, especially the ones he played on concert were really blues songs in structure.

After Dylan stopped touring, little was heard from his backing band. There was one studio single with Dylan, and one live track from Liverpool, "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," to this day the best live version of that song, and Robertson's playing on *Blonde On Blonde*. In 1967, Atlantic Records released another John Hammond album, this time with Rick Danko on bass (with Bill Wyman on a couple of tracks) with drummer Charles Otis. It turned out that album had actually been recorded two years before for the Redbird label which went bankrupt before the album was released.

Then in June of 1968, *Music From Big Pink* was released. It sounded nothing like the blues records with Hammond, or for that matter like the sound two years before with Dylan. Its sound was an incredible pastiche of every music that had contributed to rock and roll from gospel and country on up through blues, R&B and soul music, without really sounding like any one of them. It was rooted in tradition without being traditional, and its impact on the music world was huge. Eric Clapton pretty much said the hell with Cream. The Beatles and the Stones stopped their psychedelic experiments, and a lot of bands started moving towards country.

Having three new Bob Dylan songs (two co-written with members of The Band) didn't hurt, but the group's original songs, whether written by Robertson or pianist/singer Richard Manuel were on such a high level that they stood up right next to the Dylan songs which happened to be (and remain) some of the most heavy duty songs he had written. Manuel wrote the more personal and poetic songs, while Robertson was more of a story teller. The group had three great distinctive singers and they would toss vocals back and forth like a basketball, always surprising, always inventive. Different singers would take different verses, different harmony combinations would appear sometimes in the same song. The playing was astoundingly tight, never reliant on hot solos, but an ensemble sound. And the icing on the cake was a total genius organ player, Garth Hudson who moved in and out around all the songs, the glue that held it all together.

Their second album, *The Band* more than fulfilled the promise of *Big Pink*. The songs were entirely original, though Richard Manuel had stopped writing on his own. The range of instruments they played widened as did their sound, and songs captured a mythical vision of America, partially rooted in the past, and partially rooted in promise. It led *Rolling Stone* in their achievement awards (which back then were way funnier than they are now) to comment, that the Band was the only band who could have warmed up the crowd for Abraham Lincoln, and listening to the second album you could believe it.

Their third album *Stage Fright* continued that sound and that vision, but this time there was an edge of fear and paranoia to the lyrics. By the fourth album, *Cahoots*, cracks were starting to show. Robertson, who fully realized you had to have original songs was no longer struggling to come up with material for three singers. The Band wouldn't have another album of original material for four years.

Onstage, The Band was incredibly tight. It was a straight ahead music show, nothing extraneous, very little talking. They were one of the few groups who could bring the sound they had in the studio to the stage. At their very first shows in 1969, they switched instruments a lot, pulled out covers and unreleased songs. But as they moved from concert halls to arena, the sound became louder, harder, and the shows less adventurous.

The 1974 tour with Dylan renewed their energy, but the shows later that year and the following year showed something was amiss. Richard Manuel was clearly having problems keeping it together onstage. His voice would blow out after a couple of songs, he'd forget lyrics, and they would pull together and cover for him. When The Band announced early in the fall of 1976, they were quitting the road,

it was sad but it wasn't a surprise to anyone who had followed the group. The shows just weren't what they were. There was to be one last concert, *The Last Waltz*, which was going to be filmed. The Last Waltz wasn't just a gathering a superstars, but what the film doesn't make clear is that the Band as a whole or various members of the group had worked with all the people who played at the concert. Curiously missing from the show was John Hammond Jr. Also among the missing was Carly Simon, whom the band had backed in the studio (the sessions never released), and Robertson had played on her *Hotcakes* album, in fact on the single of "Mockingbird." *Hotcakes* was released approximately the same time as Dylan's *Planet Waves* and Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark*. There was a brief moment in 1974 where all three albums were at the very top of the charts, and Robertson was on all of them, the only time in his career he was involved in something that high on the charts. As big as they were, The Band never had a top ten single.

Originally The Band were supposed to continue as a recording group, but that never happened. Levon Helm was the first to release an album, with a super group, The RCO All Stars, that included Paul Butterfield, Dr. John, three members of Booker T and the MGs, and a stellar horn section. The album on which Robertson did a guest spot on one track, was good, but not great. The group's debut concert was just outside Philly at the Tower Theater, and the audience had a large number of local musicians. The show was a disaster. Steve Cropper and Booker T didn't show. The other guitarist Fred Carter Jr., once a member of Ronnie Hawkin's Hawks, who was a renowned Nashville session player was okay, but he wasn't Steve Cropper. More to the point, it seemed like they had spent more time picking the various hockey flags that adorned the stage than they did rehearsing.

Rick Danko was the next to release an album. It was a solid album with good punchy tunes, and he put together a very good band, but it never took off. Soon various Band members were doing club shows in various combinations. Danko and Manuel, Danko and Helm, Danko and Butterfield. Meanwhile Robbie Robertson stayed in Hollywood and found a nice niche for himself compiling soundtracks for Martin Scorsese films.

In 1983, The Band reformed.....